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ABSTRACT

Australia and New Zealand have a literacy rate of 99% (Human Development Index). Each country has a national curriculum where early literacy is the main emphasis. The author visited public schools in Australia and New Zealand to observe teaching methods utilized in teaching reading and writing. Some impressions were noted while observing in these schools. Teachers tend to work with students in small groups or in one-on-one situations rather than in whole class activities. Children are taught reading and writing strategies that they can use when they are having difficulty. Children also help each other and are responsible for their own learning. Students work at their own pace and are given frequent feedback and encouragement. (Author/RS)

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Early Literacy: A Cross-National Approach

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Abstract

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Early Literacy: A Cross-National Approach

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Much has been written about early literacy in the United States and elsewhere. Educators continue to debate the best way to teach children how to read and write. Teachers search the literature for methods that seem to be effective and others from newspaper columnists to legislators freely offer opinions regarding what we need to do to help children to become "literate."

As I work with pre-service teachers I also explore the literature and observe in classrooms where reading and writing are being taught. Many authors of materials on early literacy come from Australia and New Zealand, two of the most literate countries in the world. (The Human Development Index indicates a 99% literacy rate.) Last summer I had the opportunity to visit both countries and I arranged time to visit in two government-funded primary schools.

As a visitor it is not possible to completely understand the school curriculum and teaching methods utilized but some impressions can be related. Similarities between schools visited in Australia and New Zealand were immediately apparent. Each country has a National Curriculum where early literacy is the main emphasis. This is apparent not only in the published National Curriculum Standards but also in the classrooms visited.

Taupo Primary School – New Zealand

Taupo Primary School in Taupo, New Zealand has approximately 400 students and 18 classrooms. Class size averages 20-23 students and children with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms. A speech therapist, a resource teacher for the deaf and a reading resource teacher work with the children and teachers on a regular basis. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the school in whatever way they can. Parent volunteers provide one-on-one assistance in the classroom and help to develop needed resource materials.

During the school day the largest block of time (two and a half hours) is spent on literacy. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are given priority during the first four years. Children are actively engaged in literacy activities in small groups where everyone can and does participate.

Speaking and Listening

Five-year-olds work in small buzz groups of four to five students. Children share their special ideas and activities from the previous day. After everyone has shared they come back to the large group and one child from each group shares some idea that he/she has heard from another child in the group. This really encourages listening to others. In the seven-year-old class the children use a "talking stick" and take turns sharing. Each group is given several word cards to use in questioning each other. The word cards include terms such as *how*, *when*, or *why*. The child with the "talking stick" must select a card and use it when discussing his/her topic.

Most of the lessons are taught in English but a minimum of fifteen minutes each day is spent on learning some words in Maori which is the second official language. In

the primary grades the children often sing songs in Maori. For example, they learn the body parts as they sing "The Hokey Pokey" in Maori. They also learn some of the traditional Maori songs.

Reading and Writing

In the five-year-old class children have activity centers where they work while four or five children are participating in a writing activity with teacher supervision. The children working with the teacher on their writing sit at a table where they can look at basic words such as *am, at, to, and.* They can find out how to spell these words by looking at the provided chart. Each child also has his own personal "dictionary," which consists of a booklet containing works they are learning to use in their writing.

Before having the children write, the teacher has one child suggest a sentence and then the children discuss ways to figure out how to spell the words. A sentence suggested by one child was: "Maria's Mum has a sore back." The children find the spelling of Maria on her cubby and the teacher explains the use of 's. The children know how to spell Mum because it is in one of their reading books and many of the children have used this word in their writing. They listen to the sounds in has and decide on hz. The words sore and back are more difficult so they record only the beginning sound. The sentence reads *Maria's Mum hz a s b.*

Next each of the five children decide on a sentence to write. They also draw a picture either before or after writing the sentence. The teacher shows them how to use lines to count the number of words they will need for their sentence. One child plans to write "I am going to Daniel's party," so she makes six lines. She writes I am go to Daniel's pt. She found am and go on the list of basic words and looked on Daniel's

cubby to find the spelling of his name. She remembered the use of 's from the teacher's lesson. She wanted to spell party correctly, so she looked back at another story she had written and found the correct spelling and finally corrected it. Meanwhile the teacher is working with individual children who need guidance and feedback. She takes time to allow each child to read his/her sentence and offers suggestions as appropriate. Comments such as "What sound do you hear at the end?" "Yes, that's right." and "Aren't you clever!" were used by the teacher.

Children learn to read through their writing and visa versa. During reading time the teacher does a "guided reading" lesson. The teacher and the children look through the book before reading it. In the book *Can you squeak?* (Windmill) The children look at the animal sounds on each page such as cluck, moo, and purr. After going through the book together the children read the story "aloud" to themselves and the teacher monitors their reading. Children are reminded of strategies to use when they are having difficulty with a word. They are encouraged to read at their own pace and the teacher provides frequent feedback and encouragement.

Yarrawonga Primary School – Australia

Yarrawonga Primary School, in Victoria, Australia, has about 500 students and 22 classrooms. Class sizes average 18-21 and, as in New Zealand, special needs students are integrated into regular classrooms. They have a reading resource teacher and a speech therapist available to provide assistance as needed. As in New Zealand, Australia has National Curriculum Standards. In Australia, the Curriculum and Standards Framework (Draft only Term 2 – 1999) is currently being revised and circulated among teacher-educators for comment. In the draft copy, at each level, the learning outcomes in all

subjects are listed as well as the expectations for each student. For example one outcome for reading is: "Use a range of sources of information to make meaning from texts." This is evident when the student is able to "use context and graphophonic information to make meaning, use illustrations to extend meaning, self correct when meaning is lost, and select texts to read on the basis of interest, topic, or familiarity." Teachers are to provide continuous feedback on ways to use reading strategies to accomplish the above goal. (Curriculum and Standards Framework, 1999)

Reading and Writing

In a grade 1-2 classroom, the children read to the teacher. If a child has difficulty, the teacher points out graphophonic strategies using charts that illustrate blends and other sounds. She also encourages students to reread the whole sentence to maintain meaning. Children periodically refer to the charts for assistance without prompting.

While the teacher works with a small group of children, other groups work cooperatively. One group gives each other ten-word spelling tests based on a List of 100 of the most frequently used words. Another group does a dictionary exercise together while a third group works on creating crossword puzzles on computers. All of the children are on task and work well with each other in their groups.

Before children begin writing activities, the teacher meets with them as a group. A mini lesson is given on dictionary skills. Then the teacher tells the students if they know what they plan to do and don't need help, they can get started on beginning a story or finishing one they have begun. If they need help, they are to stay with her. Then questions are answered until each child is ready to get started on his/her own.

Overview of New Zealand and Australian Primary Schools

Similarities between schools visited in Australia and New Zealand were readily apparent. In both countries the National Curriculum emphasizes early literacy in the first four years of school. This is not only an "official policy" seen in the National Curriculum Standards, but also is clearly practiced in the classrooms visited. In Taupo Primary School in New Zealand and Yarrawonga Primary School in Australia the largest block of time is spent on reading, writing, speaking and listening. Children are actively engaged in literacy activities in small groups where everyone can and does participate.

Teachers in both countries realize the importance of individual differences and learning styles. They articulate this viewpoint and demonstrate their awareness of this philosophy as they worked with individuals and small groups. Most work is done in small groups rather than in whole class instruction. Parent and community volunteers are also used to provide more one-on-one opportunities.

Teachers in both countries seem to be in agreement that the first four years in primary school are critical. Children need many varied opportunities to develop literacy skills and these opportunities must be related to personal experiences and based on individual needs. Teachers also believe that children learn from each other and children are encouraged and expected to help each other and to work cooperatively in a variety of ways.

Public support for the schools and teacher support for the reforms and curricular modifications in process seemed strong. Given the enthusiasm and willingness to adapt to the needs of the children I observed, I feel that New Zealand and Australia will continue to provide leadership in early literacy.

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